

Report to the Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee – An approach to Budget Scrutiny 2020/21

Background

The Constitution for the Shadow Authority sets out its relatively limited functions which include; approving a budget for the new Buckinghamshire Council, setting Council Tax rates for the area and approving the Buckinghamshire Council's policy framework.

A key task for the Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee is to scrutinise a Draft Buckinghamshire Council's Budget for 2020/21 and the Medium Term Financial Plans up to 2023, which will be recommended by the Shadow Executive on 7th January 2020. To this end, the following members have volunteered to establish a Task and Finish Group to undertake this specific scrutiny role.

Budget Task and Finish Group Members

Cllr John Gladwin	Chairman	
Cllr Chris Whitehead	Vice-Chairman	
Cllr Ralph Bagge	Cllr Lesley Clarke	Cllr Alex Collingwood
Cllr Peter Cooper	Cllr Christopher Ford	Cllr Guy Hollis
Cllr Steven Lambert	Cllr Richard Newcombe	Cllr Paul Turner

Role of the Budget Task and Finish Group (Budget T&FG)

The role of the Budget Task and Finish Group is to ensure that the budget proposals put forward for the new Buckinghamshire Council are realistic and deliverable and are in line with the new Council's priorities, as outlined in its Strategic Plan.

Through interrogation of financial data and performance information and by questioning Portfolio Holders and relevant supporting officers, the Budget T&FG will assess whether budget proposals are sufficiently robust. After gathering evidence, the Budget T&FG will then produce a report making recommendations to the Shadow Executive to highlight any areas of risk and to suggest any amendments to be considered ahead of the Budget being agreed by the Shadow Authority in late February.

Key Timing Considerations

Work is already underway on building the 2020-23 Medium Term Financial Plans (MTFP) and this process is being led by the Unitary Programme Boards. Early drafts will be reviewed by senior officers and the Shadow Executive during the Autumn, before the final draft budget is confirmed in January 2020. (See *attached Appendix 1 – High Level MTFS Process*)

In **October**, the Budget T&FG can develop their background knowledge and understanding of how the budget is being built and the financial assumptions which have been used. It has been suggested that members might each choose to focus on one of the ten portfolio areas. In **November**, informal preparatory meetings will be held with each Portfolio Holder.

January 2020 will be the period of intense activity for the Budget T&FG. **W/C 7th January**, the Section 151 Officer will give a more detailed private briefing to the Budget T&FG to confirm the Local Government Settlement and highlight any key challenges or budget pressures that members should be aware of. Members will also be informed of any public consultation feedback and guided through the Draft Budget paperwork.

W/C 13th January - It is suggested that meetings of the Budget T&FG, where Portfolio Holders will be questioned on their budget proposals should be held in public and webcast. This will be during **w/c 13th January 2020** to enable all portfolio holders to be questioned in turn and to enable the Budget T&FG to then develop its recommendations and final report which will need to be considered by the Shadow Executive at its meeting on **18th February 2020**.

Portfolio Holder meetings should ideally take place over 4 consecutive days. This helps members and officers to keep their focus and to identify interdependencies across portfolio areas. Meetings and webcasts can be publicised to encourage public engagement - public questions could also be invited by social media or email.

The timing of Portfolio Holder meetings is a key consideration. Whilst Shadow Overview and Scrutiny Committee meetings are usually being held in the evenings, it is suggested that these meetings could be held during the day to accommodate member and officer attendance. All day meetings may be required to ensure that each portfolio holder has adequate time for questions. If meetings were in the evening, realistically you could only have two Portfolio Holders per meeting - this would mean stretching to five consecutive evenings, followed by further meetings of the Budget T&FG to share ideas and develop the report. As the timescale to produce a report and recommendations to the Shadow Executive meeting is extremely tight, the Portfolio Holder meetings need to be condensed into as short a time as possible.

Please see table summarising the Budget T&FG activity timeline below:

	October	November	December	Early January 2020	Mid - January 2020	February 2020
Proposed Date/s	24 th October at 5pm, Crown Plaza, Marlow TBC	Dates to be confirmed	w/c 9 th December – Dates to be confirmed	w/c 7 th January – Shadow Executive agree draft budget Date for Task and Finish Group to meet TBC	13 th -17th January – Portfolio Holders Meetings w/c 20 th January – report drafting	18 th Feb - Shadow Executive – receive the Budget T&FG Report & Recommendations. 27 th Feb - Shadow Authority agree final budget
Purpose	Financial Assumptions Briefing – S151 Richard Ambrose	Informal preparatory meetings with each Portfolio Holder	Informal preparatory meetings.	Private Budget Briefing – S151 Richard Ambrose	To question individual Portfolio Holders on their budget proposals. Meetings to be held in public and webcast to enhance openness and engagement.	The Shadow Executive will consider and respond to the Budget Task & Finish Group's Report and Recommendations.
Outcome	Members will have a greater understanding of the financial assumptions underlying the draft budget and how budgets have been aligned to the 10 new portfolio areas.	Members will be able to have an informal discussion with each Portfolio Holder around key budget challenges.	Members will discuss key lines of enquiry and ensure all relevant data will be available for January.	Members will receive the most up to date information regarding emerging budget pressures and Local Government Settlement and will be guided through the Draft Budget paperwork.	Members will identify areas of concern and make recommendations in a report to the Shadow Executive, which will be considered alongside the final budget to go forward for Shadow Authority approval.	A balanced budget is agreed for the new Buckinghamshire Council.

Key Lines of Enquiry

The Budget T&FG, working closely with the Scrutiny Officer, will identify some key lines of enquiry to follow during the Portfolio Holder meetings. Whilst the portfolio areas are very different, there will be consistent questions that can be put to all of them e.g.

- How will your proposals impact on Buckinghamshire residents?
- How do your budget proposals fit with the Council's overall objectives and priorities as outlined in the Strategic Plan?
- What are the biggest areas of risk in your budget and what plans are in place to mitigate them?

The Budget T&FG will be provided with a considerable amount of information as background to the financial proposals, including Business Plans for significant savings plans or capital investments, Equality Impact Assessments, Performance data, etc